

THE CLOCKS.

HE lay in bed, shaking with terror. One of those strange, sudden unaccountable panics that overwhelmed him so often had seized him now. It was not only at night that they came; he had known them in the daylight when the sun had been shining brilliantly on to the uneven flags of the old stone court, and everything—the dark elms, the shining borders of flowers, the red and brown of the twisted, uneven roof had stood out in sharp, brilliant outline against the bluest of skies—even then he had felt afraid.

But it was at night that it came most frequently—or in these first grey hours of the early morning, when the shadows were creeping in flocks, strange shapes and outlines, over the floor.

It was like that now; the blank, dead square of the window stared across the room at him with no expression but only a dull, lifeless gaze, like the open eyes of a dead man. The room was almost dark, but the half-light gave strange shape to the furniture; the huge cupboard against the wall by the window flung vast shadows across the ceiling; the two chairs near the door seemed to his excited fancy to move—their legs multiplied and dwindled before his eyes; now there were four and two waved wildly in the air—now there was only one, and the chair hung foolishly forward as though it were about to fall.

His clothes, flung wildly across the iron railing at the foot of the bed, were monstrous; now they were a mountain, blocking out the grey window, and now, at every turn of the eye, they had dwindled to nothing at all, and the window stared at him again across the bare, uneven boards of the floor.

The door was a little open, so that a thin bar of light crept in from the passage; it was almost white against the grey, shadowy room, and it was on this light that his eyes were fixed.

He had woken suddenly with the thought that the gleam had gone; not that the door had closed; he could see that that was not so, but that someone or something had crossed it, blotting it out. To his wild brain this was no new thing; he had often watched the door with the same fear, but it was worse to wake up suddenly from a heavy, dreamless sleep and imagine it. It might have entered just before his waking—it might have been his entry that woke him—it might be in the room now; and he searched the room with staring eyes.

An old grandfather clock in the corner of the room ticked monotonously. He hated the sound of it; he hated the sound of any clock, and they had so many in the house. There was one on the stairs, with a high, shrill cry like the voice of his grandfather when he was angry, and there was one down below in the hall

that came up to him, softly and mysterious, like the hum of some enormous insect.

There were others in the house, and he always thought of them as live people, quite as much alive as his aunt and grandfather, Captain Bulstrode and Lizzie; indeed, at times he thought that it was only the clocks that were alive—the clocks and himself—and that one day they would march upon him, with their terrible buzzing noise, and kill him.

And now in the perfect silence of the house, with the grey dawn in the room, their voices seemed very loud, and they hid the stir that the Thing that had entered through the door would make. He did not know where it was, and he was afraid to look, but it would suddenly creep out upon him from behind the bed, and he could feel its long fingers twine about his neck and he could see its eyes gaze terribly into his.

His heart was beating so that the bedclothes shook above him and his forehead was wet; his hands had clutched the blanket and held it as though it were a talisman that would keep him safe.

Then suddenly from the courtyard came the crowing of a cock, and immediately his terror left him. That was Gabriel; he was always the first to crow. Soon there would be Hector, and, last of all, Robert; it must be nearly four, and it would soon be time for him to get up. He knew that the animals would be slowly waking, and the thought of their movements pleased him. There was company at last, and the gradually broadening light robbed the room of its fantastic terrors. He could see Gabriel, Hector, and Robert standing against the grey sky, watching solemnly the gradual approach of day. They were his best friends, kinder and more amusing than the people in the house; and he turned and fell into an uneasy, broken sleep.

When the grandfather's clock wheezed out four, he jumped from his bed and began to tumble on his clothes. For a moment he looked from the window into the courtyard below. There was Gabriel standing, sharp against the sky, on a ruined and crumbling wall that had once bound the garden. Already the sky was breaking, and white mists were creeping like serpents over the grass.

He stood, a wild and uncouth figure, at the window. His yellow hair, falling to his shoulders, was tangled, and yet held pieces of grass and leaves that had caught in it when he had lain, the evening before, on the hill beyond the house watching the setting sun. His head was enormous and all his features were exaggerated—his body looked as if it were of tremendous strength, his long arms shot from his miserable coat, his trousers scarcely extended below his knees, and his great fingers closed and unclosed, their muscles making reports like so many little guns. He sighed heavily, picked up the battered candlestick, on which the candle had guttered in the draught until it lurched fantastically to one side, and groped for the matches.

He found them at last, lit the candle, and crept softly into the passage. The noise of the clock in the hall stole up the staircase and surrounded him with a noise like the furious buzz of an insect.

"They're at it again," he said to himself, cross and angry. "They'll be up one day. They're angrier every week. I haven't done anything to you," he went on. "It ain't anything to do with me. I'd be afeared to touch you."

He crept, in his stocking feet, down the stairs. He glanced furtively at the clock as he passed it, and clung to the further wall; the candle shook a little in his hand. The grey light was penetrating through the dim shutters of the house, and the dark outlines of the hall with its row of hats, absurdly alive in the dim glow, an umbrella stand with sticks that leant rakishly to one side, the end of the cloth that had escaped its nail beating dustily against the floor, blown by the little draught through the heavy front door—all these things he faced with hurried little gasps of fright and wide, saucer-like eyes.

To his hazy impression of things, these early morning hours, when he must light the fires and sweep the house, were full of horrors, and he faced the violent scoldings of his aunt and the cursings of Captain Bulstrode with far less fear. Those things were transient and ineffectual in their consequences, but the grey, ghostly mornings spread their mist about him throughout the weary length of the day.

By seven o'clock the fires were burning brightly, the table was laid for breakfast, the floors were swept, and Janet, slattern and virago, general servant and indifferent cook, was already scolding in the kitchen.

He stepped out of the house into the garden. The sun was beating down on the uneven stones of the court, and he could see Gabriel crowing for joy on the ruined wall. There were butterflies—white and red and blue—and in the corner, against the red stone of the house, a cloud of yellow daffodils were blowing gently in the little morning wind. But the moment of escape was a short one. Soon the shrill voice of his aunt called him, and he shuffled back into the house. Why was it that as soon as there were pleasant things in the world—butterflies and flowers and a warm golden sun—in an instant they were all snatched away and the world was grey again? There were so many things that were hard to understand!

They were all at breakfast when he returned; he saw their heads through the window as he passed; the straight, tightly-bound hair of his aunt, the bald, fat head of Captain Bulstrode on which the light would shine until you could see your face in it. He crept to his seat at the bottom of the table. There were never many words wasted at breakfast-time, and there was very little said now.

"Late as usual!" sharply from his aunt. "Why can't you come when it's time?"

She was a hard-featured woman who ran, on every possible

opportunity, into points—her nose, her ears, her head, her arms, they all had sharp edges; and the stiff, steely folds of her black dress and the little steel reticule at her waist were in keeping. Captain Bulstrode was red and fat—his neck was short and thick, his eyes tiny, his cheeks heavy and flushed. He had, a little, the air of a navy man run to seed.

By the large white-stone fireplace sat a very, very old man—Grandfather Tackity. He was so old and wrapt so thoroughly in rugs that it was difficult to see whether he were a man at all; he had been, as it were, extinguished by his wrappings, and the only thing that remained alive was the sharp yellow tip of a nose and two twinkling eyes. Occasionally he shuffled his feet, and two very wrinkled old hands were stretched outside the rug and held tremblingly a plate on which was a very small piece of bacon as withered as the old man himself.

He muttered continually to himself, and, at times, his voice rose in shrill expostulation. He finished the tiny piece of bacon and turned the plate upside down to see whether something might have possibly clung to the bottom.

"Well, Jane, my dear, just a leetle piece more for your poor old father—just a leetle, leetle bit, my dear; your poor old father's so hungry, and it was such a very, very leetle piece—and it's *all* gone, my dear, *all* gone. Deary me, the old man's so hungry—the poor old man! Just a leetle piece of bread, my dear, on this beautiful morning."

His grandson at the table watched him, and nodded every now and again by way of encouragement and sympathy. He was never quite sure what his grandfather might be—sometimes he was the devil, and sometimes the spirit of one of the clocks, and sometimes nothing at all—but he understood the hungry feeling, and was sorry.

The heap of rugs was violently agitated, and the plate fell with a crash to the ground.

"Dear me!" his voice rose in a little scream, his hands waved for a moment feebly in the air. Then a look of cunning flashed into the sharp eyes. Perhaps they hadn't heard at the table. The rugs were convulsed again as he tried to move his foot towards the broken plate to cover it. But his daughter *had* heard. She was up in a moment and had moved towards him. His eyes closed and his nose seemed to shrink; his hands crept beneath the rug. "Come, father," she said, "don't be so stupid now. Breakin' good china like that." She shook him up until he disappeared altogether, then she picked up the pieces of plate and returned to her place.

As she passed the fool at the table he had drawn his shoulders in and lowered his head as though he expected a blow, but she passed him without even glancing in his direction.

He continued to watch her furtively. There was trouble in the air, trouble on every side, and it came, he knew instinctively,

from her. The clocks were always louder in his ear when danger was at hand, and now he could hear them, it seemed to him, from every part of the house.

Captain Bulstrode pushed back his plate and leant over the table. His neck bulged beneath his collar, and the chair creaked as he moved. He whispered something to the woman, and she started back. "No, no," she said. "There are other ways."

He laughed coarsely, and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. "Well," he said, "it's easy enough. . . . I don't know but it's been done before, yer see?"

The fool, watching his aunt, saw that she was different when she was looking at Captain Bulstrode. The sharp lines softened and there was light in her eyes; he wondered why. Fool though he was, he was wise enough to know that Captain Bulstrode was not beautiful.

"Damn them clocks!" said the Captain. "What do yer have so many for? With their filthy row"—he broke into muttering—"a fellow can't hear himself speak. . . . Wake the dead." The fool sympathised with that, but then the clocks knew what they were doing. They never ticked so loudly when there was nothing the matter. He wanted to press his hands into his ears to stop the noise that they made, but when he took them out again the sound hit him like a blow, and things were worse than ever.

Grandfather Tackity, having considered that the episode of the plate might be supposed to have passed, tried once more to attract his daughter's attention.

"Such a fine dahter! and such a leetle piece of bacon." He seemed to connect the two facts: Having such a beautiful daughter, why not a larger piece of bacon? "Your poor old father."

"Poor old father!" he repeated several times. But the two at the table were whispering, and paid no attention at all. She had leaned over and touched his arm, and was urging something, but he was slowly rolling his head from side to side; his eyes had disappeared altogether.

Pathos failing, the old man poked his head from the rugs and laughed—a very croaking, frog-like laugh that had little that was humorous in it.

"Oh! my dear! Your old father's so hungry! Dear me! You'd never guess how hungry he is! Such a hungry man, and such a leetle piece of bacon." He tried to raise himself in his chair, but collapsed and disappeared entirely. There were sounds of coughing from beneath the rugs, and at last he reappeared—his nose was purple.

"Drat you, father!" said his daughter, rising from the table. "Why can't you be quiet like a decent old man? I'd be ashamed—at your age, too."

She shook him up into his place again, and in reply to some

muttering: "No, yer can't have anything now—as late as it is, too. Yer greedy old man. I'd be ashamed—"

She opened the door and called for Lizzie, the servant. They began to clear the table. She turned suddenly on her nephew:

"Well? What are you standing about fer? Haven't yer got anything to do, yer great lazy lout, you? Get to work, now! Isn't it enough that we feed yer and clothe yer! Yer hulking fool that yer are!" He stood in front of her with his head lowered and his arm up—then he moved, slouching, away.

Bulstrode stood at the window and watched the old man with a smile on his lips. The old man, scarcely recovered from his shaking, was looking at the fire. Suddenly he felt that the other's eyes were upon him. He turned very slowly in his chair and faced him. The two men gazed at each other.

Bulstrode crossed the room and leant over the chair. "Tell us where it is," he said. "We won't touch it, but it's safer, you know . . . much safer."

"No, no!" The old man shook his head violently. "Yer shan't know—none of yer. Yer think yer so clever, but yer aren't. Yer shan't know."

Bulstrode frowned. "You'd better, you know," he said, softly. "It's safer—" Then he left the room.

Tackity beckoned his grandson to him.

"He's the Devil, you know," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Such a clever devil, too! Oh! dear me! But I'm cleverer—*much* cleverer!" He chuckled.

"Is he really the Devil?" said the fool, looking at the door.

"Oh, dear me, yes—Old Tackity knows. He knows a thing or two." He continued to chuckle hoarsely like a watch that had run down and was being wound.

In the things that had to be done in the morning the fool generally forgot the rest of the world. The butterflies and the sun were lost behind the carrying of coals and the scolding of Lizzie and his aunt. But to-day everything was doubly heavy; the shadowy kingdom of his world was shot with strange colours, and the passages and stairs of the house were filled with figures that vanished mysteriously as he approached them. He had seen such shadows before—they had often met him and surrounded him in his dreams, and come to him in the first grey morning hours, but he had never known them so urgent in the glare of the daylight. From the wide window at the turn of the staircase the sun poured into the house; a great golden bee buzzed furiously against the pane, and a white mist of roses hung like a cloud in mid-air, with a burning sky of blue beyond. But the figures thronged the stairs and pressed upon him and touched his arm as he stood with his finger in his mouth watching the clock at the stair-head. "They're up to their mischief. *They* know. They never call out like that when there's nothing the matter. You devils! You devils!" He shook his great fist at the clock; then

he heard his aunt's step on the floor above, and crept about his work again.

At the mid-day dinner he watched his aunt and ate his food in frightened silence. They were talking at the end of the table, and it seemed that there was some dispute between them.

"No," she said, shaking her head violently. "There are other ways, I tell you. We'll find it out if we wait."

"I tell you I *can't* wait," he said, angrily. "I've waited here long enough. You're always telling me to wait. A man would think he could spend his time hanging round and waiting—as if a fellow hadn't things to do. I tell yer I'm off to-morrow."

Her face went very white, and she clutched his arm. "No. You can't leave me like that. You wouldn't dare. You promised."

"Well, and *you* promised," he answered, roughly. "You said I should have it."

"We should have it," she caught him up eagerly. Then she went on quickly: "He isn't so well to-day. It won't be so long to wait—a week or two—"

"No—I'm sick of it," he said. "Waiting and waiting. He's got the life of Methuselah."

"Well, *he* suspects"—nodding her head in the direction of the fool. "He's had his eyes on us this long time. He's sharper than folk know."

"Well, he'd better not be," muttered Bulstrode. "That's all—he'd better not be. And what's it matter? A year or two less to his days. He's lived long enough, blast him!"

Old Tackity wasn't so well to-day. He wasn't so well as he'd been at breakfast. He took his little piece of beef without a murmur, finished it, and stared dismally into the fireplace. Every now and again he jerked his head round in a frightened way and glanced at the table, but he said nothing.

The afternoon was the fool's holiday. He wandered through the fields, up the hill, and down into the wood. There he was fascinated—frightened. The darkness and the silence terrified, but the colours, the little wind that blew the leaves across his feet, pleased him. But to-day there was utter silence. The leaves hung in so thick a tapestry overhead that the sun could not pierce them, and it was very dark. At his frightened ear seemed to crowd things that he could not see, and down the long silence of the forest-paths came the whispering patter of mysterious feet.

He fled back into the sunshine, fearing pursuers as he ran. He flung himself, panting, on to the side of the hill in the full glare of the sun, and watched the dark and sinister house, the high stone wall, the clustering gables, the enclosing trees. What were they doing there, he wondered? Had anything happened? Something was going to happen. He knew—the clocks had told him. Supposing it had happened already? He drew his coat up over his collar and waited throughout the afternoon. Then when the sun

grew low and the shadows slipped, like birds with trailing wings over the long golden breast of the corn, he returned. The house, with its thick walls and small diamond-paned windows, was already dark. A fire burned in the kitchen; the room was empty. He tossed his hair back from his forehead, and groped in the cupboard; he was hungry, he had been hungry all day, and if they would not give him anything, then he must take it. But the cupboard was empty, and a sound made him draw back in sudden alarm. It was the clocks again; he could hear their beat in every part of the house. There was one in the room there with him, and he watched its round, smooth face with growing fury. It was laughing at him—he could almost see the grin, and it mocked him for his ignorance. As he looked at it the madness surged in his brain, and suddenly he leapt at it, and with his fist broke the face. His hand was cut and began to bleed furiously; the glass fell with a little sound like a cry to the ground. He noticed the blood, and began to whimper. His face grew white with terror, for the hands had stopped, and the great pendulum had ceased to swing.

"What will it do? What will it do?" He cowered back against the wall and stared at it. It seemed to him that its grin had changed to a frown, and its silence frightened him more than its noise had done. With trembling knees and shaking hands he crept from the room and up the dark staircase. On the landing he paused to think. He must hide somewhere, for they were pursuing him; even now he thought that he could hear their footsteps. He turned blindly to the first door that was at hand and pushed it open. As he did so there was a sudden noise from every part of the house—all the clocks struck eight. He gave a little scream of terror; to him it sounded as though they were all calling to each other, bearing news of the thing that he had done. They knew, and they would follow him; and he stumbled blindly head-foremost into the room. The place was thick with dust, so that he coughed and choked; at last he made out a dim lamp, and by the side of it, sitting propped up at the table, his grandfather.

At the sound of the opening door the old man cried out: "No, no—I tell you! It's no use your coming here! You devil! You devil! You devil!" Then he saw who it was. "Oh, my poor flesh!" he said, "it's you, is it? Oh! I'm glad it's only you. I thought it was the other. Deary me, what a shock for an old man!"

"Let me in," said the fool, coming close to him. "Let me in. They're after me. They're coming up the stairs."

"Oh, they won't come in here," said Tackity, confidently. "I'm too clever for 'em by half. They can't do anything, they can't."

"I've killed one of them," said the fool, shivering. "I broke his face with my hand. See!" He held it up for the old man to see.

"That's right," said the other, nodding his head. "Brave boy! That's right!"

The fool crept into a corner, and at last he slept. His dreams were troubled, and he gave little cries, and he moved uneasily. Then suddenly he awoke. Someone was in the room. It was difficult to see because of the dim burning of the lamp. The old man was bending over the table, and in front of him was a great pile of round, yellow metal; he let it pass through his hands so that it tinkled and glittered as it fell in front of him. But it was not that that had awakened the fool. Someone had opened the door. Suddenly through the mist he saw the Captain; he would have screamed had not fear held him silent. He was stepping very silently, like a cat, and his face was white and his neck bulged over his collar.

The old man had not seen him; he was still murmuring to himself with pleasure at the sight in front of him. Then something warned him, and he turned round with a little cry.

"No, no!" he screamed. "You devil, you——"

But Bulstrode was upon him. He said nothing at all, but he caught the skinny throat between his hands and bent over it. Another little strangled scream, then the hands beat the air wildly for a moment, the face turned purple under the light of the lamp, and the head fell right back, crookedly, across his shoulder and stared at the fool.

Bulstrode looked for a moment at what he had done, then he began furiously to pour the gold into his pockets. He filled them all, and yet there was more; he filled his handkerchief and tied it; he found a box that was on the table, and he filled that. Then he crept from the room, locking the door after him.

The fool did not move. He did not understand what had happened. He sat crouched there for a long while, and then the head, leering at him so strangely with fixed and staring eyes, annoyed him.

"They're gone," he said, in a whisper. "They're gone, grandfather. Yer can move now." But old Tackity was silent.

Then the fool began to be frightened. "Grandfather! Grandfather!" he whispered. The light of the lamp jumped up and down and the shadows on the wall leaped with it. The house was absolutely still; he could not even hear the clocks. He moved from his corner and raised himself on his knees; he lifted his hand and, very gently, touched the old man's coat.

"Speak to me, grandfather," he said. "They're gone. He won't hurt you again. Oh! The shadows!" The oil had nearly failed in the lamp, and the flame flared up and died down like a jack-in-the box; the room seemed to jump with it. His hand touched the man's shoulder, and now it travelled down the sleeve. He stopped and let his fingers travel round the buttons—they were so hard and cold that he started for a moment. Then his fingers slipped off the coat and touched the back of the hand. The knotted veins stood out like iron, but the flesh was clammy and warm. His own hand

was suddenly frozen. He could not move it away, and he knelt there, rigid, with his eyes fixed in front of him.

The flame of the lamp gave a leap and for an instant the room was alive with light.

Everything sprang out of the darkness—the table, the shuttered windows, the dirty floor littered with papers and the unswept refuse of fifty years, and, at the last, for a moment, the white face, the crooked neck, the filmy eyes of the old man.

Then the lamp flickered out into darkness. The fool struggled to his feet, and, with little cries, his hand stretched before his face, he crept towards the door. Suddenly he stumbled. There was something in the way. He pushed it aside and knew that it was the leg of the dead man. The touch that he gave it brought it heavily to the floor.

He did not dare to move. He felt as though the body were on every side of him. He became wild with terror and there were strange noises in his ears. Suddenly he knew—it was the sound of the Clocks. They were coming up the stairs. The buzzing grew louder and louder. The room was filled with the sound.

He shouted "You devils!" and stumbled to his feet. He must get out, but the dead body stopped him—it stuck to him so that he dragged it with him as he moved.

Then they were upon him; the room was filled with them; their hands were at his throat, their cry was in his ears, their breath was on his cheek. He beat them off with his hands but they had him by the knees—they dragged him down and down—

When the grim silence of the house stirred an inquisitive attention, its doors were invaded.

In the dusty room at the head of the stairs they found the dead bodies of the fool and the old man lying, in a tangled heap, together.

H. S. WALPOLE.